

# Jane Austen Society of North America

VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NO. TWENTY-NINE - FEBRUARY 1990

## CAROLINE HERSCHEL - ASTRONOMER

In many ways, Caroline Herschel was typical of Georgian and Regency women: subject to the legal domination of father and brothers, completely dependent on them for financial support, restricted to a minimum of formal education, subject to being moved from home to home at the option of others, destined for a life of household drudgery.

Yet in spite of these restraints, before her death she had become renowned in the field of astronomy, discovered eight new comets, received accolades and medals from Royal Societies, and personal attention from Kings and Queens.

Caroline Herschel was born in Hanover in 1750 into a musical family. Her father, bandmaster of the Hanoverian Guards, taught her to play the violin well enough for concert performances, but her music could only be indulged in when her mother was absent or in a good mood. Her elder sister having married and left home, Caroline was the one who became the household drudge. She was taught to read and write, but nothing more. Only her father and her brother William showed her any affection. She was small and plain and the only future in sight seemed to be a place as governess: she had taught herself fancy needlework, millinery, and lace-making, in hopes of being able to support herself. But her life changed in 1772 when she was rescued by her brother William.

Military life in the Guards had proved too hard for William Herschel, and he was sent to England to take up a musical career there. His success was almost immediate. He attracted attention playing the violin in concerts in London; later he moved to Bath as oboist in Linley's celebrated orchestra, and organist at the Octagon Chapel. At the height of his fame in the 1770's, he obtained an orchestral place for his younger brother Alexander, and brought his sister Caroline to Bath to live with him and pursue a singing career.

Caroline's training began with learning English, arithmetic and keeping accounts, to prepare her for managing the household affairs. But she was also given voice training, and soon was in demand at evening parties and at the winter concerts in Bath and Bristol. Her future seemed pleasant and secure.

Once again, however, through no choice of her own, the direction of her life was completely reversed. Music had never been William Herschel's only interest. His thirst for knowledge led him



in many directions, but astronomy proved to be his true vocation. Not satisfied with the instruments available, he set about making his own telescopes, grinding and polishing mirrors and lens of continually increasing size. Caroline was essential to him in all his work. Besides cooking the meals and keeping the household running smoothly in the midst of all the confusion of manufacturing optics - a lathe in one bedroom, a cabinet-maker in the drawing-room, workshops in every available space - she read to him, copied borrowed papers, calculated the positions of nebulae, and became his indispensable assistant in every way.

When Caroline had arrived in England in her early twenties, she knew no arithmetic. Now she had to learn as she went along - scientific formulae, converting sidereal into solar time, problems in trigonometry, using tables of logarithms - anything that came up in the course of the work. When she asked William a question, the answer went down in her "commonplace book" - even the multiplication table was kept always at her side. But no error of computation was ever attributed to her.

Once again, however, Caroline's life was upset. In 1781, William had discovered the planet subsequently named Uranus (the first planet discovered since the five known from antiquity), had been invited to bring his telescope to the Royal Observatory at Greenwich - where it was considered far superior to anything there - and was appointed as a royal astronomer. The salary of £200 a year was modest but it enabled William to drop his musical career, and devote all his time to astronomy. To augment his income, he made and sold telescopes, but the work was onerous and time-consuming. Finally royal grants made possible the construction of the giant telescope he desired.

Like so many women of the time, Caroline had to leave her home once more, and move with William and Alexander to Windsor. There again Caroline took up her duties of keeping house while helping William make telescopes and search the skies for new discoveries. Every clear night when the moon was not too bright, they spent from dusk to dawn. Days were busy with writing papers, keeping records, supervising the workmen, and receiving the famous astronomers from all over the world as well as society visitors who came to see the Herschels and the telescopes. Only on cloudy nights were they able to snatch a little sleep.

In spite of this rigorous schedule, Caroline managed to take time for herself, "sweeping the heavens" with one of the smaller telescopes. In 1786 she discovered a new comet, the first woman ever to do so. In all, she discovered eight, in five of which cases her priority was unquestioned. She began to receive honour in her "eccentric vocation" (as Fanny Burney called it) and was recognized as her brother's official assistant, with a salary of £50 a year.

But again life was disrupted - William was married in 1787. Caroline had to give up the place of his housekeeper and move into lodgings - what she called in her diary, her "solitary and cheerless home". The upset must have been a bitter disappointment at first, but the family maintained cordial relations and Caroline later became very attached to William's wife and family.

Caroline Herschel continued her daily or nightly work at the observatory. She prepared an Index to Flamsteed's observations of the stars in the "British Catalogue", adding a catalogue of 561 omitted stars. This was published in 1798 by the Royal Society. The Royal Family paid her special attention, inviting her to Windsor and to Buckingham House. She maintained a firm friendship with one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, with whom she had attended the same dress-making class long ago in Hanover, and the Royal Dukes and Princesses were frequent visitors.

With all the honours and royal attention, Caroline Herschel remained quiet, unassuming and kind. Fanny Burney wrote of her as "very little, very gentle, very modest, and very ingenuous; and her manners are those of a person unhackneyed and unawed by the world, yet desirous to meet and return its smiles". Caroline's devotion to William only increased through the years, and at his death in 1822, when she was 72, she was in despair. In her grief, she made an unfortunate decision: she signed over all her savings to a feckless younger brother Dietrich, and went back to Hanover to die. Once again fate foiled her plans - she lived for another twenty-two years!

Instead of remaining in England and helping William's son John with the work which had come to mean so much to her, she nursed Dietrich until his death, and then lived on, among essentially uncongenial people, kind enough, but with no interest in the research which had been her life's work. She had changed too much in the fifty years in England to fit in on her return to Hanover, but she would not go back on her promise. The monotony of her days was enlivened only by correspondence with her brilliant nephew, and occasional visits from him and from other renowned men of science, none of whom came to Hanover without seeing her. In her modest lodgings up two flights of stairs, she could not even see much of the stars - the high roofs of the houses opposite shut off her view.

The work went on. She made a catalogue, and arranged in zones, all the star clusters and nebulae which William Herschel had found, an invaluable help to her nephew Sir John Herschel in his review. The Royal Astronomical Society published it and awarded her a Gold Medal for its execution: "an extraordinary monument of the unextinguished ardour of a lady of seventy-five in the cause of abstract science". In 1835, she and another woman were created honorary members of the Royal Astronomical Society, a distinction never before conferred upon a woman. Later, the Royal Irish Academy similarly honoured her. On her 96th birthday, Humboldt brought her, from the King of Prussia, the Gold Medal of Science. Her books of "Recollections" contain almost all that is known of William Herschel's personal life. At 92, she began a history of the Herschels, but failing eyesight prevented her from finishing it. She died quietly in 1848, aged 98.

Caroline Herschel was not an inspired genius actively pursuing a line of abstract enquiry. But her persistence, endurance, precision and zeal, entirely devoted to her brother William, made her the ideal assistant, and made possible his brilliant discoveries. She kept to the inferior place proclaimed for women, but what a place she made of it!

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#### OPTIMIST OR REALIST ?

Jane Austen was on the front page of the Manchester Guardian a short time ago. Editorial comment on a report about pessimists and optimists (the pessimists had been found to have a more realistic view of life) suggested more studies on happiness. The writer commented on Jefferson putting the pursuit of happiness in a central place in his draft of the Constitution [actually, it was the Declaration of Independence], and pointed out that his contemporaries were certain of the way to achieve it, although each might favour a different route. "Some might still agree with Samuel Johnson: 'There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn'. More, particularly in modern Britain, are likelier to agree with Jane Austen - 'A large income is the best recipe for happiness I have ever heard of'."

--- To keep you on your toes: where is the quotation of Jane Austen from? ---

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"MOST PRECIOUS TREASURES"

The Torquay Natural History Society in Devon has a delightful problem on its hands - what should be done with the treasure trove of old letters recently discovered in a storage room? Considering that these letters are handwritten and signed by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Goethe, Berlioz, six French kings, Catherine the Great, and other notables in the arts and sciences, the problem is not one to be decided lightly.

The box of 1,500 documents was willed to the Society in the 1930's by the daughter of William Pengelly, a well-known Victorian geologist who corresponded with many of his famous contemporaries, such as Pasteur, Darwin, Lister and Humboldt, and bought other letters at auctions.

The letter from Napoleon berates a too-lenient general; one from Nelson arranges wages for one of his crews; and one from Catherine the Great discusses the treatment of Swedish prisoners-of-war. Keats writes to his fiancée, Fanny Browne, Byron settles a gambling debt, and Brontë writes to her publisher.

The letter from Jane Austen was not unknown. It was published by Lord Brabourne (the son of Jane Austen's niece Fanny Knight) in 1884, and subsequently in Chapman's collection of Jane Austen letters, where the editor notes "Original not traced". Written on January 8, 1799, to Cassandra on her birthday, the letter is a delightful collection of bits of family news, discussion of fashions, and mention of a cold and a "complaint" in one of her eyes which may prevent her finishing the letter. She describes a recent ball, and a visit with friends, and comments on items in Cassandra's last letter. There are several blanks in Chapman's version, and this newly-recovered original may clear up the missing information.

Good luck to the Torquay club members who have momentous decisions to make.

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CHECKMATE OR STALEMATE - by David Macaree

*Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. - Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (P&P)*

How many girls have thought seriously of their choice of mate? Oh yes, lots still have romantic dreams of Mr. Right but, let's face it, most act in this situation as if they were left-handed. The maiden who is anxious about her future, therefore, will find it a useful exercise to ponder the qualities of the male animal whom she hopes to share that future with.

Such chill calculation is far from the passionate world-well-lost-for-love attitude portrayed in periodical fiction as the acme of female bliss; in the long run, however, it may pay off better than succumbing to protestations of undying devotion when the lights are low and soft music creates those dangerous nostalgic feelings of yearning. More to the point is to discover how much lover-boy has in the bank, or better still in these days of inflation, in real estate. After all you don't see him in the dark and you can easily wear dark glasses in the day-time

if he's too hard on the eyes; a healthy holding in property, however, can stand the strongest light, and its value increases during the night hours just as much as in daylight.

In today's world the married woman is far more than the household drudge of past generations, condemned to the sink, the stove, and the occasional gossip at the woman's guild, or as the Germans say epigrammatically, *Kinder, Küche, und Kirche*. In this context, she has to keep the brute in his place and make clear to him where that place is and what being in it entails. As good fish are in the sea as came out of it, and it's easy to throw the catch back if it falls short of expectation.

Be realistic, then, in your choice, ladies; if perfection is unattainable ensure the closest approach to it in worldly possession. Remember you'll probably still be around after old superman has shuffled off this mortal coil; make sure the wherewithal is also.

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### EASTER BONNETS

*"Look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall pull it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I can make it up any better...but there were two or three much uglier in the shop."*

Jane Austen was intensely interested in everything that went on around her, the latest fashions included. From London or Bath, she reported the styles of ladies' hats to Cassandra, generally with much amusement:



*June, 1799: Flowers are very much worn, & Fruit is still more the thing. Eliz: has a bunch of Strawberries, & I have seen Grapes, Cherries, Plumbs & Apricots -*

*We have been to the cheap shop, and very cheap we found it, but there are only flowers made there, no fruit; and as I could get four or five very pretty sprigs of the former for the same money which would procure only one Orleans plumb...I cannot decide on the fruit till I hear from you again. Besides, I cannot help thinking that it is more natural to have flowers grow out of the head than fruit.*

But what would Jane Austen have thought about the Spring hats recently seen at a millinery show in London? One item, titled "Keep Westminster Tidy" is a green straw caved in at the top and filled with what looks like a pile of real trash. Another is a scoop-shaped creation filled with real mussel shells.

I'd love to hear Jane Austen's comments on these!

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### QUOTATION

"She envisaged going into the Hotel bedroom and drawing curtains - they would be dark red and once drawn she would click on a light and sit in an arm-chair and read some of Jane Austen in order to re-discover through that woman reserve and perseverance". (In the Hours of Darkness, by Edna O'Brien -- thanks to Barbara Peacock).

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ILLUSTRATING JANE AUSTEN - Mary Millard



[ This illustration by Henry Brock was used on the front of the conference folder at Santa Fe. At the last meeting of the Vancouver group, we discussed the picture, and questions were asked:

"What is Darcy holding behind his back? Is it a hat ('chapeau bras'?), and if so, what is he doing with his hat at a dance? And what is it that Elizabeth is holding - fan or dance card?"

My invaluable consultant sent the following explanation; Ed. ]

The illustration, like most of those for Jane Austen's works, is full of inaccuracies, not only as to costume. I am sure that Sir William Lucas's drawing room was not so elegant, and it is unlikely that he had a grand pianoforte.

The occasion portrayed is not a ball, but an informal evening party at Lucas Lodge, where impromptu dancing takes place to the playing of Mary Bennett. Yet Elizabeth is shown in full court dress, which she probably did not own. Note the train, separate from the skirt of the gown.

When P&P was published, young ladies were wearing petticoats which cleared the ground and exposed the "ankles". Just right for reels and country dances.

Mr. Darcy is not wearing full dress, which required a sword, breeches and hair powder. The tight pantaloons shown were one of the permissible styles for young gentlemen of the period. But he would never carry a chapeau-bras at such a party, or with such a costume.

The chapeau-bras was not meant to be worn. It was a relic of the 17th and early 18th century custom of wearing a large, feather-trimmed hat indoors, partly to show how rich you were, and partly to use in performing the flourishing ceremonious bows of that era. But the hat would crush the expensive curls of your periwig. Hence the clever invention of the flattened imitation hat which could be carried, and waved around when you had to bow. By Jane Austen's time, gentlemen still carried them to formal parties in London -- what a nuisance!

The lady's fan (Elizabeth holds one in the illustration -- dance programmes had not been invented) served some of the same uses as the chapeau-bras. It was employed for graceful gesturing, concealing a yawn, a blush, or the fact that your teeth were bad or missing. I doubt that Elizabeth took one to the Lucases' because she did not expect to dance. Fans are mentioned only three times in Jane Austen's novels, and only in connection with real balls. In NA, Catherine gazes upon hers at the cotillion ball, hoping that John Thorpe won't notice her. Later, Henry Tilney refers to the "fan and the lavender water" as normal equipment for a woman at a dance. That is because she might become faint or sweaty. William Price, at the Mansfield Park ball, uses his partner's fan to cool his exhausted sister.

Jane Austen does not give us a photographic image of her day, but a rational little world emancipated from the aristocratic artifice of the past, and not yet contaminated by the revival of squiggly furniture, voluminous petticoats, corsets, useless and preferably consumptive heroines, and other horrors of the Victorian age. Nineteenth-century illustrators do no justice to the wholesome simplicity which we treasure in her exemplary characters.

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RECOMMENDED READING: In connection with the above explanation, Mary Millard has suggested those interested should read: Thorstein Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class, ch. VII - "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture" (1899, revised 1912).

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#### A PORTRAIT OF CASSANDRA - by Keiko Parker

My enthusiasm to collect the illustrations of Jane Austen's novels has now extended to include other novels illustrated by Hugh Thomson. One of my recent acquisitions is Mrs. Gaskell's Cranford, illustrated by him. I was fondly thumbing through this book, when an illustration particularly caught my attention. I include it for the reader's scrutiny. Surely this is the portrait of Cassandra Austen burning the letters of her dear sister Jane! The passage in the book reads:

*...the desirableness of looking over all the old family letters, and destroying such as ought not to be allowed to fall into the hands of strangers...*

*Miss -- undid the packet with a sigh; but she stifled it directly, as if it were hardly right to regret the flight of time, or of life either... the tears stealing down the well-worn furrows of Miss --'s cheeks... And one by one she dropped them into the middle of the fire, watching each blaze up, die out, and rise away, in faint, white, ghostly semblance, up the chimney, before she gave another to the same fate.*

It was a sad day for all Janeites, when so many of these precious letters were committed to the flames; but then we are the strangers and Cassandra was probably right in thinking that we should not be allowed to pry into these intimate thoughts of our immortal Jane.



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"I AM PERFECTLY SERIOUS IN MY REFUSAL" (P&P) - Kathleen Glancy

*"In all their walks he had had to jump her from the stiles; the sensation was delightful to her. The hardness of the pavement for her feet made him less willing upon the present occasion... He advised her against it... but no, he reasoned and talked in vain..."*

Here are my thoughts on how other JA heroes would have reacted to her reckless conduct:

Colonel Brandon, Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram would have uttered solemn warnings, but in the end would have let her jump.

Henry Tilney would have presented a witty argument against jumping, but if she persisted, refused to let her do it.

Mr. Knightley would have refused point-blank.

The likelihood of Louisa getting up the nerve to so much as ask Darcy is not strong - but he too would give a peremptory refusal if she did.

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Rex Stout, the creator of Nero Wolfe, said:

"I used to think that men did everything better than women, but that was before I read Jane Austen. I don't think any man ever wrote better than Jane Austen".

(Quoted in Murderess Ink, by Dilys Winn)

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THE PROMISED LETTER OF THANKS....

Mr. Collins is not the only one who has letters of thanks to write - and our new hasti-notes with the charming illustration by Joan Hassall of Jane and Cassandra in the garden at Steventon are for sale at each of our meetings: a package of 10 for \$8.00 (plus postage, if you order by phone or mail).



This Newsletter, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, comes out four times a year: February, May, August and November. All submissions on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome. Mail to the Editor: Eileen Sutherland, 4169 Lions Ave., North Vancouver, B.C. V7R 3S2. Price to Non-members: \$8.00 per year.